

Sea

AND PACIFIC MOTOR BOAT

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Serena Heralds the July 4 Start of the Race to Honolulu

Cast Away On Mysterious San Miguel

Diane Leslie Huffman is a sailor of note. She and her husband brought a thirty-five foot sloop from Hawaii to the mainland two years ago, and last year were in a crew of four which brought the 37-foot ketch Coco from the Canary Islands to the Barbados. Fred Huffman has crewed in several TransPac crossings, as well as races to Acapulco and Mazatlan. This year he will be aboard the K-50 Flare in the TransPac.

SAN MIGUEL ISLAND is only forty miles out from Santa Barbara, but is seldom visited. Perhaps because it's an uncomfortable passage across Santa Barbara Channel, beating into the wind. Or it may be the forbidding rumors about the island, or the inhospitality of San Miguel's terrain.

I had long wanted to visit this mysterious island, and now we were on our way. There were six in our crew, and we were sailing William Wilson's K-50 *Rascal*, borrowed

Secure in my bunk, I dreamed of finding Indian artifacts and interesting relics.

As we anchored *Rascal* in Cuyler's Harbor, the only sheltered indentation on San Miguel, the wind was blowing furiously around Point Conception, spraying great volumes of sand. The crew went ashore in a rubber dinghy, struggling in the wind and choppy waters. We walked slowly down the long windswept beach, then began the long ascent of the cliff-like sides of the island to the old house. There had once been a road, but it was now so eroded, narrow and steep that it was difficult to stay with it, and the wind threatened to toss us into the deep gulch below. Brightening the desolate scene were many types of wild flowers and succulents.

Finally we reached the plateau, and walked through high, browned grass until we could see a stone cross to our left and the famous old house and barn to our right. The cross marks the spot where Cabrillo was buried in 1542.



At Symington Cove . . . only a half-buried hull and a bare mast



The old farmhouse, built from the timbers of wrecked ships

for the occasion. As we crossed the channel, I passed the time reading the history of San Miguel.

Indians had lived there a thousand years ago. Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, Spanish conquistador and discoverer of California had died on the island. In more recent times there had been a number of unusual occupants of this lonely spot. A house was built there at the turn of the century from the wood left from various shipwrecks. The last permanent resident on San Miguel was Herbert Lester, who took his own life rather than leave the island when the government evacuated San Miguel at the start of World War II.

The wooden walls of the old house had weathered to a beautiful texture with a greenish tint created by a tiny fungus.

One of the rooms still contained an old brass bed. In another, we were shocked to see what appeared to be the body of a man lying on an old cot. This turned out to be an unoccupied jumpsuit, apparently left by some recent explorer.

We slowly descended the mountain before sundown and battled our way through the blowing sand of the beach. Safe again aboard *Rascal* in the waning twilight, we were startled to see a man half way down the road, waving his

arms at us and shouting, "Shipwrecked, shipwrecked." Two of our crewmen returned to the island to investigate.

The story they told us later that evening was of two sailors who had been marooned on San Miguel for four days. Their ship had been driven ashore at Symington Cove on the treacherous windward side of the island. They had struggled to the dubious shelter of the farmhouse, and were gradually carrying salvage from their boat to this refuge.

Both were suffering from shock, and were too exhausted to attempt to come aboard *Rascal* that evening.

The next morning the stranded men arrived on the beach about ten o'clock and the boys brought them aboard in the dinghy. The older of the two was wearing the jumpsuit which had so startled us the day before. He was the owner of the wrecked ship, but seemed to feel that the loss of the boat had become secondary to the problems of survival during the past four days.

His crew was a boy of seventeen, a shy, dark, handsome boy of Aleutian and Cherokee Indian parentage who was hoping to join his father in the Caribbean area.

After a good breakfast with plenty of coffee, the exhausted men revived sufficiently to tell us the story of their misadventure. The owner, an airline navigator, had bought the thirty-year-old thirty-foot wooden sloop fourteen months previously with the idea of making a voyage down the California coast, then through the Panama Canal to the Caribbean. He worked on the boat in his spare time and hired the boy, a good carpenter, to help.

When the boat was ready at last, the skipper sold his house, gave up his job and sailed out of the Golden Gate. The trip down from San Francisco had been rough and they were using only headsails. Rounding Point Conception the strong winds and mountainous seas tore away the main

being dashed ashore. They pumped and bailed in an effort to keep her from sinking. Finally they realized they would have to leave the pounding, battered boat.

They struggled through the rough, cold surf to the beach, carrying what gear they could. Until dawn they toiled back and forth, salvaging valuable gear before it was ruined by the sea water. Then they threw themselves on a salvaged sail and slept.

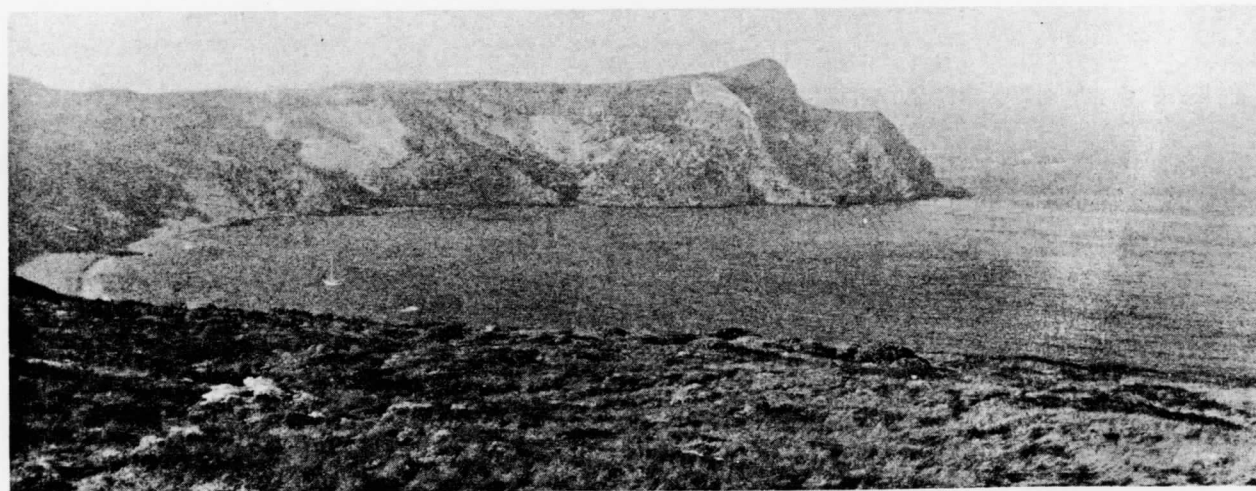
They had heard of the old farmhouse, and when they had partially recovered, hiked in its direction, hoping to find shelter from the cold winds and blowing sand. They left messages written on the sails, spread out on the beach. At the house they found an old wood-burning stove which provided some warmth. The next days were spent in hiking back to the boat, completing salvage operations. Most of the canned food was retrieved.

The evening they spotted *Rascal* in Cuyler Harbor, the castaways had planned to set a brush fire which might call attention to their plight.

Leaving the salvage to be picked up later, we took the men to Santa Barbara and the comforts of a hotel. On this trip to San Miguel we had found not historic relics, but human souvenirs.

Four days later we returned to the island to visit the scene of the wreck and help with salvage operations. We made the long, difficult trek to Symington Cove, passing over rugged terrain very different from the other side of the island. We passed many kitchen middens, mounds of shells of edible mollusks which marked the site of early human habitation. We rummaged through several and were rewarded by a rubbing stone and half of a large grinding bowl.

At the edge of the plateau overlooking Symington Cove



Rascal at anchor in Cuyler's Harbor

hatch. They could see the light on Point Conception as well as an arrow beacon on the mainland — both so bright that they felt certain the boat was well in between the coast and the Channel Islands.

Then, suddenly, they heard surf. They attempted to turn the boat with the help of the auxiliary motor, but the motor was swamped and refused to respond. The plunging boat struck a rock which tore some of the planking out of the keel, and water spurted in to the cabin. They attempted to radio for help, but the radio, too, had been damaged.

They threw out anchors, hoping to keep the vessel from

we looked down upon a mile of beautiful sandy beach, marked by bits of planking, pieces of metal and other remains of wrecked ships. Then we saw the skipper, sitting by a little campfire in the middle of his salvaged objects — sails, poles, a ship's lantern, radio direction finder and a clock. The boat itself was half buried in the sand, the hull buckled in the middle. The mast was still erect and whole, though the rigging was torn away.

Oblivious of the tragedy the sun shone on the tide-washed sands and the fresh tracks of sheep, foxes and crabs.

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